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Verbal Patterns in Dyadic Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Selected aspects of Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic" model of symbolic interaction were operationalized to describe and compare verbal patterns in transactions between five pairs of friends and five pairs of strangers. Based on Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory, it was predicted that interactants would display verbal patterns unique to the stage of their relationship and to the intimacy level of their conversation. Friends were found to orient toward two definitions of the situation and to emphasize five pentadic ratios significantly more often than strangers. Strangers relied more than friends on three other ratios. Low intimacy conversations differed from other intimacy levels on one aspect of the definition of the situation and six ratio categories. These findings suggest that Burke's system offers viable categories for characterizing verbal patterns at the various stages of relationships.

Verbal Patterns in Dyadic Interaction

Introduction

Altman and Taylor (1973) have recently proposed a developmental theory of interpersonal relationships in which they hypothesize a gradual overlapping of personalities as interactants pattern verbal, nonverbal and environmentally-oriented behaviors. Using an onion skin model, they view personality as a series of successive layers of systematically organized items varying in accessibility to others. A number of regions partition the self structure into a set of topic areas. Each region has a dimension of breadth (the number of items in the region) and of depth (each item's assigned level of intimacy). As a relationship progresses, interactants share or disclose more items of greater intimacy with interpersonal exchange gradually shifting from peripheral subject matter to more central topics of conversation. The theory predicts the rate of penetration to vary as a function of reward/cost ratios, personality, and situational factors. Verbal, nonverbal, and environmentally-oriented behaviors are treated as sensitive indicators of the level of social penetration or degree of attraction between social actors.

Altman, Taylor, and their associates have conducted a number of studies which support the general postulates of social penetration theory. For example, one study of social exchange (Altman and Haythorn, 1967), in which pairs of men were isolated and confined to small rooms for ten days, demonstrated environmental behaviors to vary as a function of the relationship. By sampling the isolates' use of chairs, beds, and tables, the experimenters determined that compatible pairs established territorial boundaries early and then tended to use each other's space rather flexibly while incompatible

pairs began without clear boundaries and then established rigid territorial areas. Studies like these have identified specific nonverbal and environmentally-oriented patterns exhibited by Ss under different experimental conditions.

Studies of verbal behavior in social interaction, however, have been one step removed from the direct observation and description characteristic of nonverbal and environmentally-oriented research. A typical approach to verbal interaction is to measure frequency and intimacy of disclosure but to ignore the actual patterns of verbal behavior associated with various levels of subject-matter intimacy and/or with differing stages of interpersonal relationships. For example, Jourard (1971) concluded that disclosure increased when a confederate initiated interactions with Ss by revealing personal information about herself.

Taylor and Altman (1966) refined Jourard's approach by developing an instrument which rates the intimacy value of 671 separate statements (e.g., "Things I am touchy about," and "Lies that I have told my friends") and places each statement into one of thirteen a priori categories (e.g., Religion, Own Marriage and Family, Love-Dating-Sex). Previous instruments used by Jourard and others (e.g., Worthy, Gary, and Kahn, 1969; and Rikers-Ovsiankina and Kusmin, 1958) had been inadequate for measuring the breadth of interactions. Like Jourard, though, Taylor and Altman continued to ground their conception of verbal behavior in psychological constructs. Rather than describe verbal interactions in process, they established various conditions (e.g., social isolation of dyads; or dyads made up of low and high revealers) and then asked Ss at different points in the study to fill out questionnaires indicating how much they remembered having discussed and how intimate their conversations had become. As a result,

the form or pattern of verbal exchange, per se, was ignored; sampling of verbal items was rigid and limited to statements which happened to appear on questionnaires; and complex verbal behavior was reduced simply to tallies indicating the depth and breadth of an interaction. For instance, Altman and Taylor (1973, p. 101) summarized the results of their 1969 study with Sorrentino:

> Those (Ss) having favorable interpersonal experiences talked about more aspects of themselves (breadth), spoke longer (average time talked), and were generally more intimate (depth) than those in negative conditions. Most differences were primarily at intimate levels of exchange, suggesting the differential focus of reward/cost effects.

At present, research on the role of verbal communication in social penetration is limited to the questionnaire technique which provides only a sketchy, cumbersome method for charting patterns in interpersonal transactions. A model isomorphic with the phenomenon under investigation is requisite to a more thorough analysis of complex verbal patterns in developing relationships.

Such a model is suggested by Kenneth Burke's dramatistic approach to symbolic action. As Hugh Duncan (1967, p. 249) argues, Burke's dramatism offers "a methodological answer to some of the questions that plague those who seek to relate symbolic and social experience." The method reduces language to five general categories out of which all specific terms for motives are derived. In Burke's words (1969, p. xv):

> These are: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose. In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the act (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose. Men may violently disagree about the purposes behind a given act, or about the character of the person who did it, or in what kind of situation he acted; or they may even insist upon totally different words to name the act itself. But be that as it

> may, any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: What was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it, (agency), and why (purpose).

The pentad of terms , then, provides a basic grammar from which specific descriptions of verbal behavior can be generated.

Pentadic terms are ranked and ordered differentially by individuals and groups; or as Burke suggests, "there is a hierarchic incentive . . . embedded in the very nature of language" (1969b, p. 278). Burke concludes, for example, that a pragmatist ultimately values agency terms, while the idealist emphasizes agent, the materialist favors scene, the mystic looks to purpose, and the realist cites the act as his most potent source of motivation (1969a, p. 128). This hierarchy can be charted by using a set of twenty pentadic ratios, consisting of all possible binary combinations of the pentadic terms (Burke, 1969a, pp. 15, 443). The order of terms in a ratio indicates which is dominant over the other. An act/scene ratio, for instance, indicates that a person's speech reflects act terms in control of scene terms.

Burke also identifies recurring patterns in the overall definition of situations. Watson (1970, pp. 111-121) has labeled these:

1. Recognition of an ideal (the order in its acceptable state; mystification)
2. Perception of disharmony (the existence of a problem or crisis; guilt)
3. Assessment of responsibility (determination of the cause or of responsibility for the problem; finding a scapegoat)
4. Determination of a resolution (deciding on the best solution for the problem; purgation of guilt)
5. Acceptance of the new order (recognition that the present situation is satisfactory)

In other words, at any given point in a conversation interactants will be employing pentadic terms with weighted values to define the situation

(a) ideally, (b) as a problem, (c) as a cause of the problem, (d) as a solution to the problem, or (e) descriptively. Burke's definition of situation and pentadic ratio categories, then, suggest a system for charting verbal interaction patterns in the social penetration process.[1]

Procedure

The present study capitalizes on Burke's system to describe verbal behavior in dyadic interactions by identifying definition of situation and ratio patterns characteristic of conversations between acquaintances and friends at various levels of intimacy.

Hypotheses

Four hypotheses were formulated:

1. Definition of situation patterns will differ from one another at high, medium, and low levels of intimacy.
2. Ratio patterns will differ from one another at high, medium, and low levels of intimacy.
3. Definition of situation patterns in dyadic interaction between friends will differ from patterns used by strangers.
4. Ratio patterns in dyadic interaction between friends will differ from patterns used by strangers.

The first two hypotheses were included because relationships have been shown to vary in terms of the disclosure of intimate items (e.g., Jourard, 1971; and Worthy, Gary, and Kahn, 1969). It seemed reasonable that different verbal patterns would be associated with different levels of intimacy. For example, when discussing intimate items, people may be observed using the agent/act ratio to stress causes of problems while non-intimate items may be treated descriptively with the act/scene ratio.

The third and fourth hypotheses were included because social penetration theory has established that behavioral patterns differ systematically at various stages of the relationship. Friends discuss more topics in more

depth than strangers (Taylor, 1968) and allow each other access to more personal objects and areas (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Verbal behavior patterns also can be expected to differ systematically.

Subjects

Subjects were ten pairs of female students (five pairs of strangers and five pairs of friends) enrolled in Speech 101, Spring semester at Gonzaga University. Strangers were those people who indicated they did not know one another. Friends were selected on the basis of their scores on a "friendship questionnaire."[2]

Data Collection

Audio tapes of one-half hour discussions between pairs of strangers and pairs of friends were collected. Ss were asked to discuss whatever they felt like talking about. While some general topics were suggested (i.e., things you have done lately, and places where you have been; the happiest experiences you have had lately; feelings you have when you get "chewed out" or severely criticized), it was made clear that Ss should feel free to discuss whatever seemed most natural and relevant to them. In order to avoid creating a "stranger on the train" atmosphere, strangers were led to believe they would be talking to one another for a number of sessions. It was felt that if strangers expected to see one another over an extended period of time, the data would be more reflective of conditions under which relationships commonly develop.

Instrument

An instrument was designed to isolate and operationalize aspects of Burke's system as well as levels of intimacy. The instrument required three decisions per coding unit: one to determine which definition of the situation was being emphasized, a second to locate the most significant pentadic ratio and, finally, one to determine the intimacy value of the unit. A

coding unit was defined as the starting and stopping of one person's verbal message. Brief interruptions, i.e., interjections or incomplete sentences of less than three seconds, were not treated as units.

The definition of situation section was used to determine whether description, ideals, problems, causes, or solutions were being discussed. The category "description" was used to refer to statements in which the person primarily described what things (including himself, others, places, events, etc.) are, will, or have been like. "Problem" identified discussions of what was wrong. "Cause" referred to suggestions of why things were not like they should have been. "Solution" identified how things could be changed or maintained.

The ratio section of the instrument was designed to locate the two pentadic terms most emphasized in each interaction unit and to determine which was dominant over the other. Twenty ratio categories were constructed by using all possible combinations of the five pentadic terms (i.e., act/agent, act/agency, act/scene, act/purpose, agent/act, etc.). Act terms referred to statements about what was happening, including events, thoughts, and feelings. Agent terms referred to the individuals or groups who were performing the acts. Agency terms were those that indicated how the act was being accomplished, with what tools, procedures, methods, and instruments. Scene terms referred to why the act was performed.

Finally, intimacy referred to how private the item being discussed seemed to be. If it was an item that could have been talked about to only a select few, it was recorded in the high intimacy category. If it could have been talked about to many others, but not most, it was recorded as medium intimacy. If it could have been discussed with almost anyone, it was defined as low intimacy.

Judges

The instrument was operationalized by constructing a training package consisting of definitions, examples, training tapes, and coding forms. Judges were six graduate students and one advanced undergraduate at Washington State University. Training continued for three weeks (i.e., 9 hours of formal training and 21 hours of practice coding) until judges coded a ten-minute tape with an average interrater reliability coefficient of .86. Each of the ten tapes of the conversations recorded between strangers and friends were then coded by two of the seven judges, producing two judgments per coding unit with an interrater reliability coefficient ranging from .82 to .99.

Analysis and Results

The data in this study were analyzed via chi-square (Siegel, 1956). Chi-square was used due to the categorical nature of the data, the independence of observations, and the relatively large cell frequencies obtained. When significant $\underline{X}^2$ values were obtained, a test of proportions was applied (Blalock, 1960) to determine what the exact nature of the obtained differences were. The report of results is organized around these two analysis procedures. For each hypothesis the chi-square result is reported first followed by the test of proportions results.[3]

Hypothesis 1: definition of situation patterns will differ from one another at high, medium, and low levels of intimacy. The $\underline{X}^2$ value related to this hypothesis was found to be significant at the .001 level with 8 df (see Table I). The subsequent application of a test of proportions to these data revealed two comparisons that seemed to account for most of the variance (see Table II). Specifically, it was found that "description" was used more at low intimacy levels than at high or medium levels. These comparisons were significant at the .001 level.

Hypothesis 2: ratio patterns will differ from one another at high, medium, and low levels of intimacy. This hypothesis was confirmed at the .001 level with 20 df. Table III presents the $\underline{X}^2$ contingency table that summarizes these data. The follow-up test of proportions (see Table IV) revealed 13 comparisons that were statistically significant at the .05 level or beyond. In eleven of these comparisons, the difference revolves around act/agent, act/agency, act/scene, agent/act, agent/scene, and scene-dominated ratios, all of which are used more at low intimacy levels than high or medium. The other two significant comparisons were act/agent and agent/act ratios. The agent/act ratio was used more frequently at medium levels of intimacy than high levels with the reverse being true of the act/agent ratio.

In Tables III and IV (as well as Tables VII and VIII) agency, scene, and purpose-dominated categories appear rather than all combinations of these patterns. The statistical purpose behind this procedure, presented in Siegel (1956, p. 178), is to raise the expected frequency in these cells above one. This procedure did not seem to distort the focus of the ratio category and allowed us to meet the $\underline{X}^2$ expectation.

Hypothesis 3: definition of situation patterns in dyadic interactions between friends will differ from patterns used by strangers. This hypothesis was confirmed at the .05 level with 4 df (see Table V). The ensuing test of proportions found that friends used problem and solution oriented statements significantly more frequently (.05 level) than strangers (see Table VI).

Hypothesis 4: ratio patterns in dyadic interaction between friends will differ from patterns used by strangers. This hypothesis was confirmed at the .001 level with 18 df (see Table VII). The test of proportions applied to these date indicated that friends used act/agent (.05 level), act/agency

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(.05 level), act/purpose (.01 level), agent/act (.001 level), and agency-dominated ratios (.05 level) more than strangers. Strangers used act/scene, agent/scene and scene-dominated ratios (all significant at the .001 level) more frequently than friends (see Table VIII).

TABLE I

Chi-Square Contingency Table for Definition of Situation Usage at Various Intimacy Levels

Intimacy	Definition of Situation	Description	Ideal	Problem	Cause	Solution
High		537	9	55	13	10
Medium		664	7	67	18	8
Low		1066	7	63	4	12

χ^2 required .001, 8df = 26.125
χ^2 obtained = 35.27

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TABLE II

Difference Between Intimacy Proportions in Definition of Situation Usage

Description	1	High	.24	vs.	Medium	.29
	***2	High	.24	vs.	Low	.47
	***3	Medium	.29	vs.	Low	.47
Ideal	1	High	.39	vs.	Medium	.30
	2	High	.39	vs.	Low	.30
	3	Medium	.30	vs.	Low	.30
Problem	1	High	.30	vs.	Medium	.36
	2	High	.30	vs.	Low	.34
	3	Medium	.36	vs.	Low	.34
Cause	1	High	.37	vs.	Medium	.51
	2	High	.37	vs.	Low	.11
	3	Medium	.51	vs.	Low	.11
Solution	1	High	.33	vs.	Medium	.27
	2	High	.33	vs.	Low	.40
	3	Medium	.27	vs.	Low	.40

***Significant at the .001 level

NOTE: Some of the above category totals in this Table as well as in Tables IV, VI, and VIII equal less than 1.00 due to rounding errors.

TABLE III

Chi-Square Contingency Table for Ratio Usage at Various Intimacy Levels

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INTIMACY	RATIOS										
	Act/Agent	Act/Agency	Act/Scene	Act/Purpose	Agent/Act	Agent/Agency	Agent/Scene	Agent/Purpose	Agency-Dominated Ratios[1]	Scene-Dominated Ratios[1]	Purpose-Dominated Ratios[1]
High	394	5	56	16	87	5	5	2	4	32	1
Medium	310	5	85	7	155	6	22	7	23	58	9
Low	575	22	183	12	148	4	63	4	20	104	5

$\underline{X}^2$ required .001, 20 df = 45.315
$\underline{X}^2$ obtained = 140.22

[1]Due to the low expected frequencies in some cells, these ratios were collapsed to meet $\underline{X}^2$ assumptions. See page 9 in the text for more detail on this point.

TABLE IV

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Differences Between Intimacy Proportions on Pentadic Ratios Usage

Category		Intimacy Comparisons				
Act/Agent	*1	High	.31	vs.	Medium	.24
	***2	High	.31	vs.	Low	.45
	***3	Medium	.24	vs.	Low	.45
Act/Agency	1	High	.16	vs.	Medium	.19
	*2	High	.16	vs.	Low	.69
	*3	Medium	.16	vs.	Low	.69
Act/Scene	1	High	.17	vs.	Medium	.26
	***2	High	.17	vs.	Low	.56
	***3	Medium	.26	vs.	Low	.56
Act/Purpose	1	High	.46	vs.	Medium	.20
	2	High	.46	vs.	Low	.34
	3	Medium	.20	vs.	Low	.34
Agent/Act	**1	High	.22	vs.	Mdium	.40
	**2	High	.22	vs.	Low	.38
	3	Medium	.40	vs.	Low	.38
Agent/Agency	1	High	.33	vs.	Medium	.40
	2	High	.33	vs.	Low	.27
	3	Medium	.40	vs.	Low	.27
Agent/Scene	1	High	.06	vs.	Medium	.24
	**2	High	.06	vs.	Low	.70
	***3	Medium	.24	vs.	Low	.70
Agent/Purpose	1	High	.15	vs.	Medium	.54
	2	High	.15	vs.	Low	.31
	3	Medium	.54	vs.	Low	.31
Agency-dominated ratios	1	High	.09	vs.	Medium	.49
	2	High	.09	vs.	Low	.43
	3	Medium	.49	vs.	Low	.43
Scene-dominated ratios	1	High	.16	vs.	Medium	.30
	***2	High	.16	vs.	Low	.54
	**3	Medium	.30	vs.	Low	.54
Purpose-dominated ratios	1	High	.07	vs.	Medium	.60
	2	High	.07	vs.	Low	.33
	3	Medium	.60	vs.	Low	.33

* Significant at the .05 level
** Significant at the .01 level
*** Significant at the .001 level

TABLE V

Chi-Square Contingency Table for Definition of Situation Usage by Friend and Stranger Dyads

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	Definition of Situation				
	Description	Ideal	Problem	Cause	Solution
Friend	1162	12	110	23	21
Stranger	1106	10	78	13	8

$\underline{X}^2$ required .05, 4df = 9.488

$\underline{X}^2$ obtained = 10.6164

TABLE VI

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Difference Between Stranger and Friend Proportions on Definition of Situation Usage

	Friend		Stranger
Description	.51	vs.	.48
Ideal	.54	vs.	.46
Problem	* .59	vs.	.41
Cause	.64	vs.	.36
Solution	* .72	vs.	.28

*Significant at the .05 level

TABLE VII

Chi-Square Contingency Table for Ratio Usage by Friend and Stranger Dyads

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	RATIOS										
	Act/Agent	Act/Agency	Act/Scene	Act/Purpose	Agent/Act	Agent/Agency	Agent/Scene	Agent/Purpose	Agency-Dominated Ratios	Scene-Dominated Ratios	Purpose-Dominated Ratios
Friend	708	23	126	32	248	8	22	4	25	81	9
Stranger	616	10	207	13	140	6	64	6	11	133	7

$\underline{X}^2$ required .001, 18df = 42.312

$\underline{X}^2$ obtained = 138.7012

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TABLE VIII

Differences Between Friend and Stranger Proportions on Pentadic Ratio Usage

	Friends		Strangers
Act/Agent	*.53	vs.	.47
Act/Agency	*.70	vs.	.30
Act/Scene	.38	vs.	***.62
Act/Purpose	**.71	vs.	.29
. . . . .			
Agent/Act	***.64	vs.	.36
Agent/Agency	.57	vs.	.43
Agent/Scene	.26	vs.	***.74
Agent/Purpose	.40	vs.	.60
. . . . .			
Agency-Dominated Ratios	*.69	vs.	.31
Scene-Dominated Ratios	.38	vs.	***.62
Purpose-Dominated Ratios	.56	vs.	.44

*Significant at the .05 level

**Significant at the .01 level

***Significant at the .001 level

Discussion

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Altman and Taylor's general proposition that interactants display behavioral patterns unique to the stage of their relationship is evidenced in several verbal configurations found in this study. Both the definition of the situation and the pentadic ratio categories uncovered significant differences between the conversations of friends and strangers. Friends, for instance, commented on problems and solutions more often than strangers. They also seemed to concern themselves more frequently with the causes of problems, but this finding fell just short of statistical significance. Conversations between friend dyads were unique in the emphasis placed on act/agent, act/purpose, act/agency, agent/act, and agency-dominated ratios. In contrast, stranger dyads focused more consistently on the act/scene, agent/scene, and scene-dominated ratios. Interpolated, these results suggest that friends talk more about people, what they are doing, how and why they engage in those activities, their problems and corresponding remedies. Those who have just met tend to avoid these topics and, for the most part, limit their conversations to sharing information about the places and the times in which various activities are experienced.

Definition of situation and ratio patterns also fluctuated as conversations shifted between high, medium and low levels of intimacy. Most significantly, low intimacy was distinguished from high and medium levels by descriptive discussion, by the act/agency, act/scene, agent/scene, and scene-dominated ratios, and, to a lesser extent, by the act/agent and agent/act categories. No clear patterns surfaced, however, to characterize medium and high levels of intimacy, a phenomenon that may result from the difficulty of adequately operationalizing necessarily subjective judgments about psychological states.

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The results of this study support Hamlin and Nichol's (1973, p. 102) conclusion that "certain portions of Burke's theories are amenable to quantitative research." The pentadic ratios and the recurring orientations of description, ideal, problem, cause and solution provide viable categories for detecting patterns of verbal behavior in interpersonal transactions. Further research to locate linguistic norms and options in social penetration processes might (1) chart verbal patterns between very close friends or intimates, (2) examine relationships developmentally to locate the chronological order in which specific ratio and definition of situation categories are most salient, and (3) study conversations that are topic-oriented (e.g., religion, politics, or sex) to determine whether verbal patterns vary as a function of the topic as well as the stage of the relationship.

Those investigating interpersonal communication patterns should also consider the likelihood that Burke's system offers more than a method for charting verbal patterns generated by social penetration forces. Language behavior may well be a sensitive indicator of psychological states and social relationships, but it also has been argued that social interaction takes its form in communication (Duncan, 1962) and that psychological structures are "in-formed" by communication experiences (Thayer, 1968, p. 240). Verbal form may be instrumental in determining an individual's expectations and experiences and be requisite to interpersonal rewards and costs. Research conducted along these lines would treat verbal behavior as an independent variable. For example, if one used the "friend" patterns discovered here when encountering a stranger, would the relationship develop more rapidly than if he used "stranger" patterns? The construction of communication theory, seemingly, would be facilitated by a full consideration of the impact of symbolic systems on the development of interpersonal relationships.

Footnotes

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[1]One study (Hamlin and Nichols, 1973: 101), although not directly related to the present research, indicates that the interest value associated with different pentadic ratios varies. Ratios containing purpose terms seem to have "an advantage in interest value over the other [ratios] tested." These results lend empirical support to the notion that ratios offer a viable unit of analysis.

[2]The friendship questionnaire was constructed by selecting eleven intimate, eleven moderately intimate and eleven non-intimate statements from Taylor and Altman's 1966 instrument. The questionnaires were scored by differentially weighing the statements (i.e., three points if one person indicated disclosing a highly intimate item and her friend indicated receiving the information; six points if both people had disclosed and received the same item; two and four points for moderately intimate information; and one and two points for superficial information). The five pairs with the highest total score were selected for the study.

[3]Data obtained from each of the ten dyads were also analyzed individually. Since the pattern of results for each dyad conformed to the overall findings reported in Tables I-VIII, it was deemed unnecessary to report the results for each dyad.

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